

**Historiography for Study of the New Testament: An Overview of  
Methods from the Twentieth to Twenty-First Centuries  
by  
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In the university setting there are numerous methods for the study of history, many of which would assist New Testament scholars to profitably exegete the biblical text and would breathe new life into the so called “historical critical method.” In this presentation, there will be initial discussion on the active role librarians play when new trends of scholarship emerge relative to how collections are developed. A case study drawn from the last “great trend” in New Testament Studies—literary criticism—will be offered as will a list of steps that may be taken to help predict when and what new trends might emerge in the academy. After hypothesizing that there is emerging interest in the field of New Testament for historical studies, the focus will fall on introducing approaches to history in vogue during the mid twentieth to early twenty-first centuries and which have not been exploited to their full potential by New Testament scholars. Topics covered will include, amongst others, Marxist History, The *Annales* School and Social History, Quantitative History, Psychohistory, Narrative History, Women’s History, Cultural History, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and Counterfactuals.

Historiography might be defined as the business of doing history; the theory, methods, and philosophical presuppositions used in writing about the past. In a way, historians and librarians operate in cognate disciplines. Historians write about the past while archivists and librarians collect and make available primary resources and the secondary intellectual ponderings of prior generations. Even the act of a librarian collecting items today from a publisher’s “new books list” aids some future researcher in the field of history tomorrow when our present becomes the past. But historians and librarians have something else in common too. Not only does one preserve documents and the other interpret, but both engage in the action of selection. Just as librarians develop policies to determine what items go on a library’s shelf, so too do individual historians select both what they will study concerning prior eras and the approaches they will employ while doing so. As the historian Anders Schinkel writes in the journal *History and Theory*, “Our (historians’) perception of the past . . . is not fundamentally different from our perceptions of the present. In both cases a selection is made, which means that some elements in our perception will feature more prominently, and others will remain hidden in the background.”<sup>1</sup>

To a large extent, the activity of “selection” is the core concept that informs this paper. The first section will briefly touch on the nature of the symbiotic relationship of librarian and faculty researcher and the choices each make when executing and supporting research. A limited case study related to the field of New Testament studies and how the collections of three libraries either undergirded or did not buttress the efforts of faculty members employing the literary critical methodologies that took the field by storm in the 80s and 90s will serve as an example of the importance of the library’s role in promoting scholarship at an institution through its activity of selection. Following the case study, attention will turn to the issue of how a librarian might try to predict future trends in New Testament scholarship so that

decisions about selection of new materials for the collection might be made in ways to develop the holdings pro-actively. Finally, the issues, trends and methods of historiography itself will be surveyed as it is predicted that the application of fresh methods of doing the business of history will likely be the next “big thing” to energize the field of New Testament Studies in the decade to come.

### **The Role of the Librarian *vis-a-vis* the New Testament Scholar**

Librarians traditionally serve an important support role in the academy and its essential activity of producing sound, research-based scholarship. If one imagines the production of publications that stand up to criticism and great academic insights as a play, then faculty members are the stars in the drama. The librarians, by contrast, are part of the stage crew, ensuring that the appropriate props (the books) are retrieved from the storehouse and available in the wings or lovingly placed in designated places on the stage so that they are easily accessible to the performers who are creating the magic that is the spectacle.

That is not to say that the support role is demeaning; it is vital. To illustrate, visualize a dramatic scene in a stage play where a character is supposed to reach into her purse to answer a cell phone at a specific point in the script. The sound crew sends through the theatre’s sound system the AC/DC *Are You Ready?!* ringtone that the director selected for the phone on cue. But the actress obviously is not. Ready, that is. Much to the amusement of the audience she reaches into her purse to—answer her hairbrush?! The phone itself, to the chagrin of the stage crew, is still plugged into its charging station in the green room. While good for some unintended comedic relief, such an oversight disrupts the flow of the theatrical production and ultimately reflects poorly on the professionalism of the performing artist. All levity aside, the question of whether or not a library is helping to make certain the faculty it serves is ready to do what they do best rests in large part on the props upon which the professors can draw in the collection.

The metaphor of the stage is apt. When one looks at the library literature it is clear that librarians themselves embrace the idea of performing this supportive role in the work that they do. Paul Mosher gives a beautiful example. In an article focused on the librarian’s responsibilities in collection development he describes that enterprise as “. . . an awareness of the patron community or communities, development of real understanding of what kinds of knowledge and information they need, what they do with it, and what patterns (e.g., formats, types, subjects) of library materials will provide for those needs.”<sup>2</sup> In the subtitle of his article, he labels librarians “stewards of knowledge and information.” A steward is definitely a person who is in a position to buoy up others rather than to grab the limelight.

But is it always the case the librarians have only a back-stage contribution to make to the life of the academy? A simple title search limited to the past two years for the phrase “librarians as” within Wilson’s *Library Literature and Information Sciences* database confirms that the self perception of librarians is one of a subordinate role. Mary Wepking, for instance, writing from a school librarian perspective, explores the issues of whether or not school and public librarians might work as “partners for student success.”<sup>3</sup> In this case, an egalitarian relationship is envisioned, but the librarian would not presume to be the team leader. Other equally modest descriptions of the library in support posts abound. For example, Kerry Sutherland focuses on college librarians “as literacy sponsors.”<sup>4</sup> The topic of librarians as writers of professional library literature is addressed by Carol Smallwood,<sup>5</sup> whose anthology about the subject completely

misses the idea that in specialty libraries librarians may hold dual advanced degrees and may actually do research in their areas of expertise in addition to the field of library science. Other titles focus on librarians as teachers,<sup>6</sup> expert intermediaries and knowledge coaches,<sup>7</sup> cultural ambassadors,<sup>8</sup> information gatekeepers,<sup>9</sup> counselors,<sup>10</sup> and collaborators.<sup>11</sup> Completely absent from these descriptions are the ideas that a librarian might serve as a trend-setter, a trend-spotter, or an agent of change in moving a branch or field of scholarship forward. Yet that is precisely what theological librarians, who are specialists in their subjects, and who, in the action of collection development, are poised to choose materials that will, in turn, be checked out by faculty in their research, may be called upon to do. It is a chicken/egg question. Does the library stock, advertise, and recommend materials that will spark new questions and research interests amongst faculty, or does faculty “*ex-nihilo*” (or perhaps from their personal journal subscriptions or sessions attended at conferences) “get new ideas” and request that the library begin acquiring books to support their research? In other words, are librarians to remain backstage when the curtain rises on a new revolution in scholarship, or do they step forward and take an active part in directing the drama? Even Paul Mosher hints at this possibility when he writes, “Too often in the past, librarians were passive agents in responding to the needs of users rather than anticipating and patterning those needs. The collection development policy process helps make librarians change agents rather than reagents . . . .”<sup>12</sup>

The time to test this new role for librarians may be at hand. To be specific, it is predicted that a new trend in New Testament Scholarship is emerging and will involve the flourishing of heretofore untapped methods of history that will be applied to set the New Testament in its Roman historical context. Will our libraries be ready? Will we be able to help our faculty to be at the forefront of this trend? Before turning to what those methods might be, or how a forward-looking librarian might spot new developments that are getting ready to bloom in the academy, taking a step back to look at one library’s track record is illuminating. What follows next is a case study to see whether or not one of the last enduring crazes in New Testament interpretation, the use of literary theory, was supported by the collection development policy of the Garrett-Evangelical library. The case study should illustrate clearly the vital role collection development plays in furthering scholarship in our institutions.

### **Collection Development, the New Testament (NT), and Literary Theory: A Case Study**

In an attempt to analyze whether or not the United Library at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (GETS), a standalone theological library, has had a history of serving as an “agent of change” in developing its collection in ways that might trigger new associations and ideas amongst the faculty, a limited case study was structured related to the intersections of the disciplines of Literary Criticism and the New Testament. Indeed, interpretive methods from the field of literature in the 50s and 60s were tremendously important interpretive frameworks that really picked up steam and began rolling through the field of New Testament studies in the 1980s. The working assumption when approaching the GETS holdings was that a collection consisting of nearly a half-million bound volumes would contain at least a fair number of works by the primary literary theorists, even though the “P” or literature call letter sequence, is ancillary to the main religion collection and relatively small.

There are many works that are staples in the field of literary theory, so a few were chosen at random—Northrop Frye, Richard Rorty, Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Wayne Booth and Mikhail Bakhtin—all names that have been frequently encountered in the methodology sections of various works of Biblical Scholarship in the past 15 years. Indeed, even a keyword search in the *ATLA Religion Database*<sup>®</sup>, expanded to include searching within the full text of articles, reveals that these thinkers have been fairly influential in religious scholarship, with the key words “Derrida” garnering 966 hits, “Bakhtin” 177, “Frye” 57, “Rorty” 40, “Bloom” 14, and “Booth” coming in last place with 5. Booth is, however, standard reading for anyone working on the concept of irony.<sup>13</sup> Shockingly, despite the prevalence of these thinkers in the ATLA database, the online catalog of the United Library reveals not a single title by Bakhtin, Rorty, or Booth and a paltry showing for the others. For instance, there are eight entries for Bloom, but only three titles for Derrida, despite the fact that he was a prolific author. Convinced that the absence of these luminaries in the Garrett-Evangelical library must be an aberration, a search was conducted in the paper card catalog to determine if some of these literary theorists might be represented in the effectively hidden collection of the 20,000 or so items still awaiting retroconversion. Some comfort was taken in the fact that a card for a volume by Northrop Frye was found, though there was a bit of disappointment given that it wasn’t his 1957 landmark *Anatomy of Criticism*<sup>14</sup> but rather his later work, *The Stubborn Structure*.<sup>15</sup> And still, the relief in this find was dimmed by the fact that additional works by the other authors selected for the study were not in evidence even in the library’s hidden stash of books.

Lest one think that the collection development practices of the United Library stifled creativity of the Garrett-Evangelical Theological faculty in the last decades of the twentieth century, there are two factors that weigh into the picture. First, in 1978 the seminary library was invited to participate with Northwestern University in what was for that era a tremendously innovative OPAC. Indeed, it was programmers at Northwestern’s library who developed the Notis system that was later purchased by Voyager. Because individual faculty members could make use of a scope to select the particular catalog that they would search, either that of the seminary or the university, as early as 1980 the faculty could happily hunt through the collection of the university by walking down the stairs from their offices to the seminary library (Internet drops were not readily available in faculty offices in the early era of the OPAC) rather than by trekking through frigid Chicagoland winter weather to the Northwestern library. Because the vast holdings of a major university library were much easier to access, the assumption was that the investigations of biblical scholars at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary would be fertilized by exposure to resources on a wide variety of disciplines, not just literary theory. And this did prove to be the case, though not so much with literary theory. Rather than following the herd, faculty members like Robert Jewett juxtaposed the Bible and popular culture instead.<sup>16</sup> Presumably, the prevailing thought in terms of the GETS library collection development in the 1980s was that there was no need for the seminary to buy books on literary criticism which Northwestern already held in its collection. This was a practical move, since at the same time the collections of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary were being merged with that of Garrett-Evangelical, and library attention was focused on de-duping and relocating titles on the shelves via LC classification rather than on exploring how cognate fields might relate to Biblical Studies. Being otherwise occupied, it was assumed that faculty members at the seminary only needed to walk a distance equivalent to two football fields to

have access to a trove of works by Fry, Bakhtin, Rorty, Bloom, Booth, and others. And, in any case, whenever religious publishing houses finally published guides to literary theory in which Bakhtin, Derrida, and their brethren were summarized for scholars in religion, well, they were happily added to the seminary collection as it was being re-configured.<sup>17</sup>

Ascertaining which works of literary criticism were held in the collection and developing a hypothesis for their absence was only the first phase of the case study. To see if relegating the task of collecting primary works to the university rather than housing them in the seminary collection was *de rigueur* at other theological schools, benchmarking was done relative to the collections of two other randomly selected seminaries who, like GETS, were standalone institutions catering to theological education and existing within the shadow of monster universities. The two selected were Iliff School of Theology, a partner with the University of Denver, and Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS), where the Speer Library is a few blocks away from the main Princeton University Firestone Library. For PTS, with its comprehensive collection and generous book budget, the results were as expected. Four works by Bakhtin, Frye's classic *Anatomy of Criticism*, 56 items (both in French and various translations) by Derrida, 33 entries for Harold Bloom, both Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* and *Rhetoric of Irony* along with 11 works authored or co-authored by Rorty were all present in the catalog.

Iliff, which is a United Methodist Seminary, as is Garrett-Evangelical, evidenced numbers between the two extremes represented by its sister school and PTS. An author search in the Iliff Isaiah catalog resulted in 11 hits for Frye, 5 for Rorty, 17 for Bloom and Derrida, respectively, 8 for Booth, and none for Bakhtin.

	GETS	PTS	Iliff
Bakhtin	0	4	0
Bloom	8	33	17
Booth	0	10	8
Derrida	3	56	17
Frye	1	11	14
Rorty	0	5	11
Totals	12	119	67

*Figure 1*

While it is natural that a collection cannot possibly contain every book that a scholar would feasibly wish to include in his or her research, by any stretch, as this case study shows, there is a lacunae within the GETS holdings that steps have already been taken to remedy. Whether having items in a collection triggers faculty scholarship or faculty research interests prompt the building of a collection, it is clear that during the period when the United Library staff was by necessity focusing on merging two library collections into one in the 1980s rather than keeping an eye open for new modes of scholarship investigation that might come into vogue, some of the NT faculty at Garrett-Evangelical were pursuing avenues of investigation other than literary criticism. But, having just finally formally consolidated the GETS and Seabury-Western collections into one permanent collection in one building during the 2009-

10 academic year, the United Library is again poised to take up its crystal ball so that it may be on the cutting edge of the newest trends in New Testament studies. How does one, however, make predictions in ways that ensure that collection development dollars are not being spent on items that are too far out of trends in religious research and doomed to do nothing but collect dust on the shelves?

## **Paving the Way for the Future: How to Spot Emerging Trends in New Testament Studies**

When the librarian engages in the prophetic task of trying to ferret out new directions for a field of scholarship, there are a few basic tools and portents for which the astute collection developer should keep watch. And they work, too. Back in 2003, a paper was read at the ATLA conference in Portland in which it was predicted that Johannine scholarship would become increasingly aware of the Roman contexts in which the Fourth Gospel was written.<sup>18</sup> Amazingly enough, a number of monographs have been published recently on that very subject, including Lance Richey's 2007 *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*<sup>19</sup> and Tom Thatcher's *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel*<sup>20</sup> which appeared in 2009.

There are a number of indicators both internal to an individual institution and external in the field at large that show when change is coming and that prompt a library to start getting ready. The internal indicators will be listed first.

- 1) **Curriculum Change.** The classroom is the laboratory in which a professor tries out new ideas. In many cases, if a new course is proposed to the faculty, a new book on that subject, or a related one, will no doubt be just a few years in the offing. If an entire series of courses or a new degree program is launched, the department involved is likely getting ready to go in brand new directions entirely. It would serve the library well to talk with faculty involved in alterations in the curriculum and to obtain sample syllabi or course descriptions.
- 2) **New Faculty Hires.** When faculty members in a department invite new colleagues into their midst, they are either looking for someone with new ideas who will help to feed their own creativity, or they are seeking someone who thinks just like they do and uses the same methods, so that together they can create a "school of thought" that becomes a departmental brand. In either scenario, the hire is about the perfect "fit" for the department. Know your faculty and know something about the new hires whom they invite to join them. Watch especially when lower ranking faculty and recent PhDs from institutions not otherwise represented on the current faculty are hired to replace senior professors. Newly minted PhDs come with fresh ideas and from academic cultures that may differ significantly from their new places of employment. Keep an eye out, as well, for "generation gaps." Researchers are products of their socio-historical contexts, and when a wave of retirements happens at once, entire institutional research agendas and paradigms may change.
- 3) **Increase in ILLs or a change in character of ILLs.** As soon as faculty and PhD students begin requesting ILLs in cognate fields or for the courier service to deliver items from the nearby university library, if that perk is included in reciprocal borrowing agreements, it is time to become alert. New things are afoot. It may be wise, in fact, if items are in print, to make it a point to purchase what faculty and

PhD level students request via ILL for the collection. One might expect that if faculty or PhD research assistants read a book, they will be predisposed to recommend it to others.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to factors within an individual institution that herald change such as new curriculum, new faculty hires, and increases in ILLs, the broader academy is also full of indicators that presage fresh paths in an academic discipline. Two will be mentioned.

- 1) **New sections or consultations in academic conferences.** Since the topic in this discussion has been New Testament studies, it is worthwhile to point out that the Society of Biblical Literature is the laboratory in which new ideas are floated. If one carefully reads the call to papers, one will see not only new sections but also innovative themes within old established units. If unable to attend professional conferences themselves, it behooves librarians to request faculty members to pick up and bring back copies of program guides and session abstracts so that librarians may keep abreast of the latest scholarship vicariously.
- 2) **Repetition in titles amongst new books.** The astute cataloger can always spot when a trend is at its peak because book after book after book comes across his or her desk with similar sounding titles. If there are three to six in a single year, or five to ten over a series of two or three years, all of which deal with a narrow topic and have standard “key words” in their titles, it is an almost certain sign that scholarship will soon achieve saturation. “Subject fatigue” motivates researchers to be on the lookout for new directions for scholarship.

These two factors, subject fatigue, and the burgeoning of new consultations at the Society of Biblical Literature are currently in play. At the moment, looking at the evidence provided by these two indicators provides hints that a new trend is on the horizon. What is the new current in scholarship? Likely it will be the application of previously underutilized methods of historiography in examining Christianity’s Roman context. A brief look at some of the evidence that leads to this conclusion is warranted.

### **Reading the Signs of the Times: The Move to Employ a Variety of Historiographical Perspectives in Setting the NT in the Context of Rome**

If subject fatigue can be predicted when titles of similar nature become ever more prevalent on the new book lists of publishers, then scholarship is nearing that point with studies on the NT and the Roman Empire. In point of fact, a title search for the word “Empire” in the United Library card catalog reveals not only the two books on the Fourth Gospel and Empire by Thatcher and Richey mentioned previously, but also Kazuhiko Yamazaki Ransom’s *Roman Empire in Luke’s Narrative* (2010), Neil Elliott’s *Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (2008), Seyoon Kim’s *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (2008), and John Dominic Crossan’s *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (2007). Surely there are others that have been published that have not been added to the United Library collection. Yet if the idea of one more study on a NT text and Caesar causes one to wearily sigh, the current (2010) and past programs of the Society of Biblical Literature provide clues as to the future direction of scholarship.

First, a preoccupation with “history” is here to stay. For example, the experimental *John, Jesus, and History* consultation has finished its three-year trial status and now is a more



permanent section in the SBL program. The academy remains fascinated with questions of history. Second, while books with the word “empire” in the title were predominantly written from the perspective of political history, other types of history are now being explored. Evidence of this includes the appearance of new forums at the conference like the Early Christianity and Ancient Economy session. In that section, papers are being presented on a variety of topics from the Galilean economy to the origins of the Jewish pottery industry to a paper that mines the NT for information relevant to the Roman textile and clothing trade.<sup>22</sup> Work on economic history and the NT was foreshadowed in works like James Jeffers’ *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*,<sup>23</sup> which was published more than a decade ago now. But Jeffers’ interest in the ancient economy is evident, for example, in how he plumbs the text of the NT to find passages that provide insight into the commercial fishing industry in Palestine. From a description of the type of nets in use to the hypothesis that fishermen banded together to form cooperatives,<sup>24</sup> Jeffers paints a vivid portrait of the everyday lives of those who made their living on the Sea of Galilee. In essence, if the recent deluge of works on Roman Political History and the Gospel or Pauline texts make that subject seem passé, it is predicted that scholarship is branching out into economic history. If that is indeed the case, it is likely that other types of history are soon to follow. When one begins digging into the NT against the backdrop of Roman medical history, legal history, women’s history, cultural history, history of thought—and a host of other “types of history” besides—become useful topics of inquiry. The political historians who have focused on issues of empire have done the academy a great service. They have opened a seam upon which others may now capitalize.

There is a new awareness that historiography is not only about the historian selecting the “type” of history that should be explored, but also the method, or set of scholarly presuppositions, that will be employed in the investigation. Granted, the sheer volume of works on Jesus and empire taken together have a sort of sameness because of their focus on political history. They also, however, tend to employ similar presuppositions in their approaches to that topic. In short, there is a tendency to use, either consciously or unconsciously, the same historical method or families of methods. Simply employing a different method or philosophy of history than is present in these works to the question of empire might result in texts that have strikingly different interpretations and insights to offer relative to the early Christians and Rome.

What are the elements of the current prevailing method? Books on the NT and empire at the present time are concerned with issues of power and authority, the unequal distribution of resources between those who rule and those ruled, and struggle or opposition between the two groups. These elements are all clearly articulated by Richard A. Horsley in his 2004 edited volume, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*. In his introduction to that book he writes,

The Roman imperial order, in all its facets, constituted the context in which the movement that Paul joined and helped to lead took its origins in the province of Judea . . . Focus on the Roman imperial order as the context of Paul’s mission, however, is leading to another recognition. Instead of being opposed to Judaism, Paul’s gospel of Christ was opposed to the Roman Empire . . .<sup>25</sup>

and a few sentences later Horsley continues,



. . . Paul set his gospel of Christ and the new communities he catalyzed in opposition to the Roman imperial order: the whole system of hierarchical values, power relations, and ideology of “peace and security” generated by the “wealthy, powerful, and nobly born” and dominated by “the rulers of this age,” at the apex of which stood the imperial savior. Imperial power relations operated in complex ways through cultural-religious forms integrally related to social-economic forms of domination . . . .<sup>26</sup>

In this single page of Horsley’s book, the verb “opposed” and its noun, “opposition,” occur commonly and are present in conjunction with the concepts of power and wealth. All of these elements suggest the influence of what is commonly known in the field of historiography as a “Marxist” theory of history.

With its foundation in the writings of Karl Marx, whose concepts of history and progress might cautiously be described as dialectical, or almost Hegelian in nature, Marxist-influenced interpretations of history were used to great effect in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. Although originally associated with the state histories of the Soviet Union, scholars like the British historian Edward. P. Thompson helped to give them a foothold in democratized and capitalistic nations with his 1963 work entitled *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>27</sup> Anna Green and Kathleen Troup in their reader on the theory of history assert that the Marxist influence on twentieth- and early twenty-first-century methods of history is extraordinarily strong, impacting many historians in the postmodern traditions—including those who write from gender and postcolonial perspectives.<sup>28</sup> Thus it is no surprise that New Testament historians like Horsley have focused on concepts of wealth, power, oppression, class, and to some extent resistance—if not the full-blown Marxist concept of revolution, in their interpretations of the New Testament documents. The prevalence of the Marxist method of interpretation in the field of history at large means that its application in historical treatments of topics relevant to Biblical Studies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, was virtually a foregone conclusion.

Despite its popularity, though, there are weaknesses in Marxist interpretations as they are generally practiced. Specifically, it is rather easy to fall prey to a particular weakness in dialectical theories of history on the grounds of logic. Setting up dichotomies between oppressed and oppressor, or ruled and ruler, can automatically limit the field of logical possibilities that are inherent in disjunctive reasoning. To understand this point, it is necessary to graph out a disjunctive truth table.

	P	Q	P v Q
1	T	T	T
2	T	F	T
3	F	T	T
4	F	F	F

*Figure 2*

In Figure 2 if “the oppressed” are represented by the letter “P” and the oppressors by the letter “Q” a trend emerges when the works of the dialectical historians are represented in the table. Studies produced using the Marxist and other methods based on dialectical underpinnings tend to depict history in ways where either the story of the oppressor or the oppressed is true (the second and third lines of the table). When looking at the disjunctive tale, however, it is clear that the third column also includes a “T” in the first row too. Thus, according to the logic in the table, the possibility exists that both P and Q are valid. In other words, it should be possible for both the oppressor and the oppressed (or the imperial power and the colonial power) to benefit from their interactions. Accounts that demonize or idealize the positions of either P or Q run the danger of overlooking “win/win” scenarios.

The best illustration of a “win/win” situation related to Judea and the Roman Empire comes, ironically enough, through the eyes of Monty Python. In the film the *Life of Brian*, a parody of first-century history and the context in which early Christianity had its nexus, one of the Jewish characters suffering under the oppressive Roman Empire asks what the Romans had ever given the Jews in return for the benefits of occupation. Rather than the expected reply of “nothing” or “just more grief,” the crowd of his fellow activists surprisingly begins to list positive elements of Rome’s imperial rule, from aqueducts to roads and other elements of infrastructure besides. Finally, in exasperation, the main character in this scene demands,

All right . . . all right . . . but apart from better sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and a freshwater system and baths and public order . . . what *have* the Romans done for *us*? <sup>29</sup>

And one of his interlocutors comments, “Brought peace!”

Lest one think that this exposition is overly critical of Marxist or other dialectical approaches to history, it must be pointed out that there isn’t a single extant theory about writing history that is without points of vulnerability. While beyond the scope of this particular exposition, any good survey of modern historiography will present not only how each approach serves to correct or balance the limitations in other methods but will present the usual criticisms to which the particular theory under examination is typically subjected. In the case of Marxist methodologies, the overview by Ernst Breisach is very thorough.<sup>30</sup>

The alternatives to Marxist approaches in Western historiography are numerous. To just give a quick overview, the next few minutes will be spent outlining the highlights of a few including The *Annales* School and Social History, Quantitative History, Psychohistory, Narrative History, Women’s History, Cultural History, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and Counterfactuals. At the risk of not doing any of these movements justice due to extreme over simplification, what follows are thumbnail sketches that include some of the main characteristics of each. Any of these might serve as the impetus for a flurry of innovative investigations in New Testament history within the context of the Roman world.

### **Historiography: A Very Brief Overview of Modern Methods**

*“Annales” and Social History.* When approaching written records of the past, early social historians seriously considered the impact of industry and technology on wider culture, groups, and institutions when seeking explanations for phenomena. Social history was developed further in France under the influence of those thinkers who published in the journal *Annales*:

*Économies, Sociétés, Civilizations* which was begun by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in the late 1920s. In this method, rather than giving priority to political history, as Marxist historians often do, those researchers who published in *Annales* explored how various elements of cultural history and economic histories as well as the other social sciences play a contributing role in painting pictures that portray the richness and breadth of the past. In other words, historical phenomenon must be examined comprehensively. It is this driving perspective that causes this method to be identified with the concept “total history.”<sup>31</sup> There are other characteristics of this method too. For example, in its French version, time is not one dimensional, but relative and multi-layered.<sup>32</sup> In addition, social history focuses on explaining ordinary “everyday” elements of society. Examples might include family history, educational history, and other social institutions and structures apart from political history.

A different popular method is that of *Quantitative History*. This method might be readily applied to the fields of social history, economic history, demographics, and even political history, which was avoided by the social historians. It is an attempt to find patterns and draw conclusions about the past by representing data numerically. Earlier in this paper an analysis of the holdings on literary criticism for three different libraries was presented via chart format. In an attempt to interpret the data, conclusions were drawn as to why one library might have a smaller incidence of writings by those authors than the other two. That was a rudimentary quantitative analysis. By and large, New Testament interpretation and history has left the entire range of quantitative methodologies untapped. By contrast, historians of the early empire, such as Richard P. Saller, are comfortable with quantifying and represent simple items like tomb epitaphs and ages at death in table form.<sup>33</sup> Such studies, even though they are usually marketed and cataloged as works in the field of classical studies, might be mined by New Testament scholars for the data they contain when fleshing out the New Testament context.

*Psychohistory*, like the quantitative approach, has not played a prominent role with New Testament biblical scholars. Practitioners of this type of history make use of the techniques and methods of psychoanalysis to explore and understand not only individuals but also the actions of groups. In their assessment of this method, which has its original roots in the thought of Freud, Green and Troup write that psychohistory “. . . can help reveal the rational roots of apparently irrational behavior, and assist in explanation of the extreme situations of history . . . ”<sup>34</sup> One would think that with this description, the New Testament would provide fertile ground for exploration.

In contrast with the methods mentioned so far, *Narrative History* focuses not so much on psychology or social causes as it does in setting individuals and events from the past in coherent, descriptive (rather than analytical) stories. These stores can focus on a single event, or can be extraordinarily elaborate and encompass an entire cultural phenomenon. Writers in this mode evidence empathy for the subject of the story that they are telling, but do distinguish between their own enterprise and outright fiction. A leading proponent of historical narrative was Lawrence Stone, whose research interests focused on fifteenth- to eighteenth-century English history. Hayden White is another historian in this tradition who took narrative history a bit further into the realm of literary criticism with his attention to tropes and metaphor in historical writing.

Before leaving the topic of narrative history altogether, it is appropriate to say a few words about a concept that is currently creating a buzz in New Testament circles, *New Historicism*.

There is some thought that new historicism, a literary critical rather than strictly historical enterprise since it was initially promulgated by literary theorists instead of historians, is related to narrative history.<sup>35</sup> In that type of literary interpretation, not only is a piece of literature understood through the historical context in which it was written, but the piece of literature works as a primary source to provide keys to understanding the particular cultural/intellectual era of its production. While narrative history need not make use of Marxist themes, under the influence of Stephan Greenblatt, a leading literary critic who works with the method of new historicism, there is a fascination with how power is reflected within texts.

The next method under consideration may be well known. Indeed, unlike the virtual absence of quantitative approaches in the work of New Testament scholars, there has been a fair amount of work done from the perspective of Women's History or Gender Studies. Stemming from the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, this method seeks to highlight the role of women in history despite limitations caused by the virtual absence of women or women's concerns in the historical writings of earlier eras. A recent example of a work in this vein would be the text edited by Christine Joyes and Christopher Rowland, *From the Margins 2: Women of the New Testament and Their Afterlives*.<sup>36</sup>

One more slightly different approach to history is the truly interdisciplinary movement, Cultural History, or ethnohistory, as it is sometimes known. This method is essentially a marriage between anthropology and history. The focus of cultural history tends to be the stuff of everyday lives—the rituals, arts, customs, narratives, and so forth of ordinary people. It differs from traditional modes of history, which relied almost exclusively on written records, by incorporating new sources such as oral history, movies, art, dance, symbols, and a myriad of other *realia*. One underlying assumption of such histories is that culture is relative. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that instead of working on sweeping histories that span nations and national histories which attempt to encompass the stories of all citizens within their covers, cultural historians tend to focus on what is known as “microhistory.” To clarify, researchers influenced by this method tend to concentrate on single events or individual persons. With regard to study of the New Testament era, 2000 years now in the past, historians will likely have to rely on the work of archaeologists to assist in developing historical investigations from this perspective in order to assess the relationship of art, graffiti, coins, and other cultural artifacts to illuminate the New Testament.

Another term that is likely familiar to biblical scholars is that of *Postmodernism*. Postmodernism draws on the works of thinkers like Derrida and Foucault, and might be described more as a criticism of the project of history as a whole rather than a positive method. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob make this point nicely when, in summarizing the impact of postmodernist thinkers, they assert Foucault and Derrida “. . . deny our ability to represent reality in any objectively true fashion and offer to ‘deconstruct’ . . . the notion of the individual as an autonomous, self-conscious agent.”<sup>37</sup> So yes, the act of an historian making selections for what is to be studied and included/excluded and how to execute the study is a subjective enterprise. But is skepticism about the historical project at large warranted? Does the fact that subjectivity plays an undeniable role render us completely incapable of discovering nothing in the past other than reflections of ourselves? There may be a way back from this abyss. A criticism of postmodernism itself is that even if representations of the past

are partial or colored by the perceptions of the researcher, that does not necessarily make them false or of no value, as some postmodernists would seem to suggest. Such histories are merely incomplete. A painting is a representation of an object rather than that object's actuality. Yet, the act of painting need not be rejected nor the painting itself regarded as a fiction because of this limitation. Nonetheless, the skeptical approach to history has promoted fruitful work in areas where the writings and work of the "status quo" deserve questioning, such as gender studies and post colonialism.

*Postcolonialism*, which is ultimately informed by the work of the postmodernists, and may also be influenced by Marxism in some quarters as well, tends to center on lands formerly occupied by imperial powers. Such histories seek to read the colonial discourses "against the grain" to uncover the voices of the indigenous people, and particularly those who have been marginalized. At the same time, researchers using this method try to recapture, or even establish, an identity for those left behind when the oppressive powers have withdrawn. Work on the history and thought of India, in particular, provides a prime example of how a formerly oppressed people seeks to determine their own distinctiveness and story. The applicability of such methods to first-century Palestine, however, may be problematic.<sup>38</sup> There is some thought that postcolonial histories should be written by indigenous peoples, yet 2000 years separates those under Roman Rule and Palestine today. Any history today could only be constructed by "outsiders."

No survey of modern historical method would be complete without at least passing reference to Counterfactual History, also known as "virtual history" or "speculative history." The primary activity in counterfactual history is to hypothesize what the impact might have been had an event not occurred, or if its outcome might have been different. Frequently such histories begin with the words, "What if . . ." The popularity of this method began in the 1990s, and its purpose is not to create fiction or alternate scenarios, but rather to assess the lasting significance and importance of the event being investigated. Richard Lebow stresses that the counterfactual methodology provides a helpful balance to the tendency for historians to overvalue certain events that have already occurred by putting the past episodes into perspective. In addition, he asserts that counterfactuals are critical to good history because they provide comparisons that might be used to study causation as well as to ". . . tease out assumptions—often unarticulated—on which historical interpretations rest."<sup>39</sup> Certainly one might see how such a method might be valuable for study of the early Christian period when seeking to avoid either triumphalist interpretations, those with false causation, or works that are simply so selective of the facts that they are reductionistic.

## Conclusion

In biblical methods classes, one learns of a wide variety of "criticisms" that may be adopted to elucidate the biblical text. For instance, one becomes familiar with historical criticism, literary criticism, reader-response criticism, and a deluge of others. While it is tempting to assume that all historical studies are variations of the same "type" of method, in actuality there are many ways that an historian might approach his or her craft. Whatever methods an historian of the NT era selects to pursue his or her research, or whatever direction the field at large might take in the future, hopefully this short exposition will help those of us who work in libraries to be pro-active agents of change, making selections for our collections to assure

that we are ready to support our faculty researchers when the curtain rises on the next act in academic research.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Anders Schinkel. "History and Historiography in Process." *History and Theory* 43 (Feb. 2004). 39-40.



- <sup>2</sup> Paul Mosher. "From Growth to Management in Collection Development: Librarians as Stewards of Knowledge and Information." *Alki* 1.2 (July, 1985), 43.
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- <sup>12</sup> Mosher, 44.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985.
- <sup>14</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.
- <sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- <sup>17</sup> For instance, David Dawson's *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995 or Stephen Moore's *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- <sup>18</sup> Beth M. Sheppard. "The Rise of Rome: The Emergence of a New Mode for Exploring the Fourth Gospel." *American Theological Library Association Proceedings*. 57 (2003), 175-187.
- <sup>19</sup> Lance B. Richey. *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*. The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 43. Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> Tom Thatcher. *Greater Than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.
- <sup>21</sup> The key is to look for patterns and to determine if the ILL request is indeed outside of the scope of the collection because it is a personal area of interest for the faculty member.

An item should be purchased if there is the potential for it to appeal to and enrich the research of other patrons in addition to the one making the request.

- <sup>22</sup> The program booklet, with information on this session, could be accessed June 2010 at [http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses\\_ProgramBook.aspx?MeetingId=17](http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_ProgramBook.aspx?MeetingId=17).
- <sup>23</sup> James Jeffers. *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>25</sup> Richard A. Horsley. *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*. Harrisburg, London, New York: Trinity Press International, 2004, 3.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>30</sup> Ernst Breisach. *Historiography: Ancient Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 395-400.
- <sup>31</sup> Green and Troup, 88.
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- <sup>33</sup> Saller, R. P. *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. See, for instance, pp 24 and 28.
- <sup>34</sup> Green and Troup, 67.
- <sup>35</sup> Jürgen Pieters. "New Historicism. Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology." *History and Theory*. 39 no. 1 (February 2000): 21-38.
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- <sup>37</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob. *Telling the Truth about History*. New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1994, 208.
- <sup>38</sup> For an example of a study that uses this method please see Stephen D. Moore's *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006.
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